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Al-Qaeda's Past and Future[1]

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The 'when' and 'where' of Al-Qaeda's next attack are virtual unknowns. Without accurate, inside intelligence they will be difficult if not impossible to determine. It may, however, be possible to predict the likely targets and the methods of attack through an examination of past operations.

Based upon the organization's history, Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks tend to be exceedingly well-planned and executed, and generally strategic in nature. Credible allegations of state support for its operations from countries such as Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have been made.[2] Foreign intelligence support is likely in some of its bigger and more complex attacks.

In late August, as the United States prepared to mark the first anniversary of September 11 the *Washington Times* reported that a UN draft document described Al-Qaeda as, "fit and well," and prepared to carry out new attacks against the U.S., Israel, and Western interests worldwide. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban have reportedly shipped several allotments of gold to Sudan and typically, when money moves, attacks usually follow. This comes amid reports that the FBI has begun investigating Pakistani and Arab jewelry stores in the US to look for gold shipments that might fund future Al-Qaeda operations. As well, there have been reports that Al-Qaeda members have returned to their home countries to form so-called 'super cells.' Most analysts expect that Al-Qaeda will strike again, and soon - either on its own or possibly in conjunction with others radical groups or militant freelancers. It would be prudent to assume that the next strike will likely be deadly and strategic in nature, if for no other reason than to prove that the organization is alive and well, and to provoke fear in its enemies.

Since the targets and methods of past Al-Qaeda attacks are well known, they provide state security services with hints of what to expect and how to prepare to blunt future assaults. Recently CNN aired footage of Al-Qaeda recruits training for attacks involving chemical weapons and explosives, hijackings, employing pick-up trucks with gunmen concealed in the back, drive-by shootings or grenade attacks from motorbikes, assassination/road ambush of police officials, residential and golf course assassinations, drive-by kidnappings, the use of tunnels or drains for infiltration, rappelling, and raids on buildings. These tactics have been used by Al-Qaeda before and they may be planning on employing them in future attacks.

Operations up to September 11

It is common knowledge that Al-Qaeda had some connection to the February 1993 World Trade Center truck bombing that killed six people and injured 1000. Led by Rami Youssef, the attack failed in its primary goal - to collapse one tower into the next. A follow-up plan to flood the buildings with cyanide gas also failed. In addition, Youssef led an Al-Qaeda plan to bomb 12 American airliners simultaneously over the Pacific in 1995.[3] Philippine police foiled this plot, although the conspirators managed to bomb and damage a Philippine Airlines flight on a dress rehearsal. Youssef also plotted the assassination of United States President, Bill Clinton, and the crashing of an airliner into CIA headquarters in Langley prior to his capture.

In 1993, a group affiliated with Al-Qaeda and guided by the Egyptian cleric Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman was arrested for plotting a series of truck bomb attacks on the UN Headquarters, and the Brooklyn Bridge and tunnels in New York.

In November of 1995, a car bomb was detonated outside the Saudi National Guard Building at Riyadh killing seven people and wounding 60 others, mostly American. Then, in June of 1996, a fuel tanker truck was used to bomb the US military barracks at the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing 19 service

personnel and wounding hundreds of others. Two years later, in August of 1998, the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were simultaneously attacked with truck bombs, killing 250 people and wounding 5,500. Osama bin Laden subsequently boasted of complicity in this attack.[4]

The turn of the millennium witnessed the Ahmed Ressam plot to attack Los Angeles International Airport with a suitcase bomb. The attack was foiled when he was arrested at a Canada-US border crossing by alert US Customs officials. In October 2000, a small craft laden with explosives was set off near the USS *Cole* anchored in a Yemeni harbour. Nineteen sailors were killed in the blast and scores of others injured. Al-Qaeda also engaged in assassinations, the most famous being the killing of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Northern Alliance's top field commander, just prior to September 11, 2001. The suicide bombers posed as Algerian journalists, their camera concealing a powerful bomb. This successful operation was quickly followed by the terrifying September 11 attacks in which Al-Qaeda employed civilian airliners as cruise missiles and piloted them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania, killing thousands of people.

Although these attacks differed in scale, they were manifestly strategic nature. The World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks were geared to strike at America's sense of security and symbols of its power. It is also likely that Al-Qaeda also wanted to attack the World Trade Center to erase the failure of the first attack. The bombings of military installations in Saudi Arabia and the USS *Cole* in Yemen were intended to divide the United States from its Middle Eastern allies and force America's withdrawal from the 'holy lands'. The attacks on the US embassies in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrated Al-Qaeda's ability and willingness to hit American installations regardless of whether they were germane to any international disputes. The assassination of Shah Massoud was carried out to rob the Northern Alliance of its most able field commander at a critical stage in the battle for Afghanistan, and to eliminate a potentially powerful US ally in the aftermath of September 11.

Post-September 11 Operations

There have been several attacks and thwarted plots linked to Al-Qaeda and its allies that have come to light since September 11. They have all been on a smaller scale, although no less strategic. These operations can be broken down into several categories for the sake of simplicity in terms of target or method. They include:

- weapons of mass destruction
- assassination of intelligence, security and public officials
- assassination of government leaders
- attacks on large-capacity buildings
- attacks on landmarks
- attacks on diplomatic facilities
- attacks on aircraft and airports
- attacks on petroleum centers
- planned attacks on maritime targets.

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

Al-Qaeda is known to have attempted to procure WMD. It has dabbled in chemical warfare in Afghanistan, as illustrated by videotapes aired on CNN showing the killing of dogs with poison gas. Al-Qaeda has also conducted a series of discussions with retired Afghan and Pakistani nuclear scientists, Mohammed Jan Naziri, Jara Mohammed Korbani, and Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmoud. Abu Zubaydah, Al-Qaeda's imprisoned Director of External Affairs, reportedly told his captors that Al-Qaeda was plotting either airliner or truck bomb attacks on U.S. nuclear power plants.[5]

Then there is the case of the so-called "dirty bomber", Jose Padilla, who is alleged to have proposed setting off a radiological device in the US to Abu Zubaydah. Some analysts believe that Al-Qaeda was behind a reported Palestinian attack on an Israeli nuclear weapons storage facility in June, 2002.[6] It would make little sense for the Palestinians to attempt to set off a nuclear weapon in Israel, given the close proximity of Palestinian territory and the potential for mass Palestinian casualties even if the terrorists had the knowledge to do so, which seems doubtful. Therefore, it seems likely that another entity was behind the failed attack - either a state such as Iraq or a terrorist group such as Al-Qaeda with a hatred of Israel and interest in creating mass casualties. The truth surrounding this thwarted attack may never be known, but Al-Qaeda had promised an attack that would, "delight all Muslims."

Based upon Al-Qaeda's past interest in WMD, its training practices and its attempts to procure these deadly weapons in any manner possible, the group can be expected to attempt further WMD attacks against state capitals, large cities, and symbolic landmarks in an attempt to generate horrendous casualties.

Assassination of Intelligence, Security and Public Officials

As Shah Massoud learned too late, Al-Qaeda is very capable of carrying out assassinations of senior intelligence, security or public officials. In February 2002, a bomb was placed under the car of the head of Jordanian counter-terrorism, Lieutenant Colonel Ali Burjak, in an attempt to assassinate him. Al-Qaeda also attempted to assassinate Lieutenant-General Muhammad al-Arami, the deputy head of Yemeni intelligence with a bomb planted near his home. Later in April, Al-Qaeda is believed to have launched a bomb attack on Yemeni intelligence headquarters in Sanaa. In May, a car bomb was driven along side a bus carrying French citizens working on a top-secret Pakistani submarine program in Karachi. Some 14 people were killed including 11 French engineers. It is very possible that Al-Qaeda backed a similar attack on an Israeli bus in June near Haifa that killed 17 people, most of them soldiers, and wounded 40 others.[7] Clearly, Al-Qaeda has an interest in eliminating key intelligence officials as a means of blinding potential opponents to future attacks or to cover their own tracks. Suicide and vehicle

bombings seem to be the method of choice due to their lethality.

Assassination of Government Leaders

Al-Qaeda may have provided support for the Kashmiri terrorist suicide bomb attack on the Jammu Kashmir state legislature, and the ground assault on the Indian Parliament in October and December of 2001.[8] Al-Qaeda's links to Kashmiri separatist movements is well known. Additionally, an Al-Qaeda suicide attack was made on the home of the Iraqi Patriotic Union of Kurdistan regional government leader, Barham Salih. Five Kurdish bodyguards were killed in the assault but Al-Qaeda failed to kill this crucial American ally.

Al-Qaeda also plotted a similar assassination of the Karzai government and former Afghan King Zahir Shah in Kabul using terrorists posing as journalists. In early July, 2002 it was revealed that Kashmiri militants possibly allied with Pakistani ties had attempted to kill President Musharraf by bombing his motorcade. Then on July 15, an Al-Qaeda hit team on a motorbike assassinated a prominent ally of former King Zahir Shah, Abdul Ahad Karzai in Pakistan. It was reported on September 5 that two explosions near the Afghan Information Ministry had killed at least 10 people and wounded a dozen others.[9]

Attacks on Large-Capacity Buildings

Jordanian police thwarted an attack on hotels and tourists in Petra due to coincide with the September 11 attacks on the United States. In October 2001, after the start of the US air campaign against Afghanistan, terrorists on motorbikes gunned down 16 Christian worshipers in a church in Bahawalpur, Pakistan. Singapore police arrested 15 people in January 2002 who were plotting to attack US military personnel, ships, and American and Israeli diplomatic facilities. In March, terrorists entered the protestant church in Islamabad's diplomatic quarter and threw grenades at the congregation, killing five people and wounding 40 others. The Passover suicide bombing attacks in Israel might also have been linked to a reported Al-Qaeda-Hizbollah alliance after rubber boats were discovered buried beneath the sand close to the attack sites. It is very possible that Al-Qaeda and Hizbollah had infiltrated Israel by sea to carry out several joint suicide attacks.[10] In April, a fuel tanker truck with a bomb was used to attack and destroy a historic synagogue in Tunisia, killing 19 people.

Landmarks

In February 2002 the contents of an Al-Qaeda terror manual were published, stating that terrorist strikes should be sent against skyscrapers, Big Ben and the British Parliament, the Eiffel Tower, and Capitol Hill in Washington, DC.[11] It was reported in June 2002 that Al-Qaeda had actually targeted Big Ben and the British Parliament on September 11, but air travel was halted before the terrorists could get airborne. In July, Spain announced that it had arrested an Al-Qaeda financial operative, Ghascub Abrash Ghalyoun, and that he had a video tape from a 1997 visit to the United States including shots of the World Trade Center, the Brooklyn and Golden Gate Bridges, the Statue of Liberty, the Sears Tower, Disneyland and Universal studios in California. After five men linked to Al-Qaeda were recently arrested in Detroit, it became apparent that they had done reconnaissance and planning for a possible attack on the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas and Disneyland in Anaheim, California, along with an American base in Turkey and a flight line of an unidentified airport.[12]

Attack on Diplomatic Facilities

In late September 2001, Spanish police arrested an Al-Qaeda member who claimed during interrogation to have been instructed to go to the U.S. embassy in Paris with a bomb strapped to his waist or to crash a hijacked helicopter into the diplomatic post. In February 2002, Italian police arrested four Moroccan men in Rome for plotting to put cyanide into the capital's water supply system near the US embassy. Then in June, a car bomb was detonated outside the US Consulate in Karachi, killing 10 people and injuring 45 Pakistanis. There have been four minor attacks on diplomatic facilities in the Middle East and South Asia since September 11, including American, British and French targets. All Western and Israeli embassies and diplomatic facilities are potential Al-Qaeda targets. Indeed, there are very recent reports that Uighur terrorists aligned with Al-Qaeda were plotting to attack a US embassy in the Central Asian Republic of Kyrgyzstan.[13] Attacks on embassies provide Al-Qaeda with an immediate potential for a 'high impact' hit at a foreign government.

Attacks on Aircraft and Airports

Singapore's Prime Minister claimed in April of 2002 that the government had foiled an Al-Qaeda plot to attack Changi Airport with a hijacked airliner. Not long after, a discarded and used SA-7 portable surface-to-air missile launcher was found on the ground outside the Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia used by American military aircraft. On July 4, 2002 a lone gunman assaulted the El Al ticket counter at the Los Angeles Airport and three people died. The FBI is reportedly looking into the thefts of airline uniforms and identification cards.

Attacks on Petroleum Centers

On June 16, 2002, two fuel tanker trucks exploded harmlessly outside the US military compound at Kandahar, Afghanistan. It is believed that bombs were planted on the vehicles and rigged to explode when the tanker trucks were inside the compound. This method of attack in was similar to the method of attack used in May to try to destroy an Israeli fuel facility near Tel Aviv. A fuel tanker truck exploded while entering Israel's primary fuel depot. Palestinian militants were blamed for the attack but speculation persists that others may have been involved, including Al-Qaeda.[14] Petroleum centers provide Al-Qaeda with both a strategic economic target and the potential for mass casualties by virtue of their proximity to population centers.

Attacks on Maritime Targets

This past June, Moroccan police arrested three people for plotting attacks against Western naval vessels in the Straits of Gibraltar. The Saudi men arrested in the plot were planning attacks similar to the attack on the USS *Cole*. It was also reported that the US Coast Guard went on alert after two groups of Middle Eastern men were seen taking notes, talking on cell phones and videotaping the inside of two ferries in Washington State. On June 24, 2002, a group of Middle Eastern men were seen videotaping the inside of a ferry traveling on the West Coast of the US. The following Wednesday, another group was witnessed in the same sorts of suspicious activity on the Bainbridge to Seattle ferry, raising fears of Al-Qaeda high-impact attacks on ferries and cruise ships. The FBI also conducted an investigation into Al-Qaeda activities involving American scuba shops after unidentified scuba divers were reportedly sited near the aircraft carrier USS George Washington in Norfolk in October 2001.[15]

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to predict where or when Al-Qaeda will strike next, clues may be garnered from past attacks and the methods by which they were carried out. Since September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda has shown a propensity for lower-level strategic attacks designed to hurt opponents and to keep the movement alive. Al-Qaeda has attempted and executed assassinations of senior intelligence and public officials, and it has attempted to eliminate government leaders in Afghanistan, India and possibly Pakistan. Al-Qaeda or its supporters have orchestrated bombings on large-capacity buildings, embassies, diplomatic missions, and petroleum centers. Osama bin Laden's organization continues to demonstrate an interest in attacking airports, hijacking aircraft for possible high-impact hits on nuclear facilities, and attacking maritime targets.

On several occasions Al-Qaeda has shown interest in landmarks of political significance to the target nation. The destruction of the World Trade Centre illustrates the determination of Al-Qaeda to return to targets it has either missed or failed to destroy in the past. Thus it is almost certain that thwarted attacks will be attempted again. Strategic defence plans must focus upon key landmarks and political leaders first. The latter will perhaps be of greatest importance, as the strategies and resources to counter Al-Qaeda and its ilk lie in their hands.

Endnotes

[1]Due to space constraints only a portion of the footnotes are included in this paper. Please contact the CISS to obtain the fully-documented version.

[2]Laurie Mylroie, "The World Trade Center Bomb: Who is Ramzi Yousef? And Why Does it Matter," The National Interest, Winter, 1995/96. and Laurie Mylroie, Study of Revenge: The First World Trade Center Bombing and Saddam Hussein's War Against America Revised (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy: Washington, D. C., 2002).

[3]"Terrorism: Q&A," Council on Foreign Relations and Simon Reeve, The New Jackals: Ramzi Yousef, Osama Bin Laden and the Future of Terrorism (Northeast University Press: Boston, 1999).

[4]Yossef Bodansky, Bin Laden the Man Who Declared War on America, pp. 258-265.

[5]Bill Gertz," U.S. weighs July 4 threat," Washington Times, 13 May 2002.

[6]Amanda Ripley, "The Case of the Dirty Bomber," Time, 16 June 2002.

[7]"Bomb kills 17 Israeli Bus Passengers," Fox, 5 June 2002.

[8]"India arrests 4 over parliament attack," CNN, 15 December 2002.

[9]"CNN Breaking News," CNN, 5 September 2002.

[10]DEBKA File, 5 April 2002. and "UPI Hears," UPI, 8 February 2002.

[11]Hamza Hendawi, "Manual of Terror," ABC, 1 February 2002.

[12]Wayne Washington, "FBI alleges plot for attack," Boston Globe, 30 August 2002.

[13]Philip Pan, "US Warns of Plot by Group in China," Washington Post, 29 August 2002.

[14]"Bomb Attack Thwarted in Tel Aviv: Israeli Fuel Depot Bombed," Fox, 24 May 2002.

[15]Richard Norton Taylor, Giles Tremblett, Julian Borger, "Hunt turns to plot on warships," The Age, 13 June 2002. Bill Gertz and Rowan Scarborough, "Inside the Ring," Washington Times, 26 October 2001.

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